

The Power of Ambiguity in “Song for a Dark Girl”

In “Song for a Dark Girl,” Langston Hughes uses lyrics from a popular minstrel song in combination with a description of the emotions felt by an African-American girl during a time of cruel treatment toward her lover, and to the African-American people in general, to express how unjust this treatment was. He does so by painting a vivid picture of the hanging coupled with the contemplation the speaker is going through due to her lover’s death. Though readers imagine these vivid images and feel the speaker’s emotion, they are left with many questions. The ambiguity within the poem allows it to be a universal lamentation.

Readers immediately question who the speaker is, and thus to whom the speaker is speaking, upon reading the title. The speaker may be attempting to speak to anyone, any “Dark Girl,” who has witnessed the discrimination of African Americans during the time period; more specifically, it may be viewed as a generalization for all “Dark Girl[s]” of that time who have lost their lover due to plots of racism. However, it seems more likely that the speaker is the “Dark Girl” herself, who has lost a lover. The fact that the speaker uses lines such as “(Break the heart of me),” indicates that this is so as she says “me” rather than break our hearts, or something to imply multiple hearts being broken.

Also in the title, the speaker explains that this song is “for a Dark Girl.” That can literally be taken as a girl who looks dark, with dark skin, an African American. However, “Dark Girl” could be taken metaphorically as well. As “dark” means an absence of light, and light is often thought of as purity and truth, readers could view this song as the opposite of that. Instead, it is a song for someone who is going through a difficult time. “Dark” also can mean ignorance, as in someone is “in the dark” about something. In this case, “Dark Girl” could be a reference to the “Girl” being ignorant about the ignominious relationship she was pursuing with the “lover.” This brings into question whether the “Girl” is really African American. Though it seems highly unlikely, she could actually be a white girl involved with an African American lover, which would be cause for him to be hanged.

The first line of the poem, “Way Down South in Dixie,” is where readers first see evidence of the song-like style mentioned in the title. This line is fitting as it is actually the last line of “Dixie,” one of the most popular minstrel songs (Baym 2031 n.1). “Dixie”

immediately gives readers an idea of where the poem took place as it is known to mean the southern United States. Because this line came from a minstrel song, readers can assume that the goal of using it in the poem was to combat the idea of minstrel shows in the first place. They were performed to poke fun at African Americans, portraying them as ignorant, lazy human beings. The song portrays a freed black slave who is pining for his old life on a plantation as it says, “I wish I was in the land of cotton” (Dixie).

“Dixie” is now, and was then, a controversial song. Some people find it offensive as it was a pro slavery anthem. However, at the time it was written, it was a sort of anthem for the South, representing the opinions of the majority that slaves wanted to be slaves, living on the plantation, even if they were offered freedom. By using a line from this song, the speaker uses the ignorance of the proponents of the song against them. The need to disprove the ideas behind minstrel shows and the thought that slaves and the African American people were content with their lives goes hand in hand with the feelings the “Dark Girl” expresses in the song. She feels that not only characterizing African Americans as ignorant, lazy human beings who would choose to be slaves over being free is wrong, but hanging them for unworthy reasons is wrong as well.

Considering the words from the first line separately from its minstrel song origin tells even more about the incident described in the poem. The first clue readers get from the poem is that it took place in the South as it begins “Way Down South.” Literally, one imagines the geographic location, the south as in the southern United States, coupled with the line ending in “Dixie.” However, more can be considered when one views south as the opposite of north. North tends to cause one to think of upward locations, heaven. Because “South” is used in the first line, the speaker hints to idea that it is not going to be a pleasant poem and may refer to the “South” in meaning hell. This idea is expressed further because “South” is placed right after “Way Down.” Again “Down” refers to a location that can be thought of as a southern point as well. By saying “Way Down,” the speaker implies that whatever has happened in the “South” is really far down, reiterating this notion of hell. It is as if whatever has happened cannot be taken back.

In line two, readers begin to feel the sadness that the speaker is expressing as she says, “(Break the heart of me).” Immediately one feels the sense of violence the speaker is trying to portray with the word “Break.” “Break” does not imply a mild emotion, but one with overwhelming emotion attached to it instead. As “Break” means to destroy violently, or in the case of a broken heart, a feeling of overwhelming sadness, readers feel the passion behind this emotion. The heart of the speaker is being broken; the heart being the vital part of a human, not only physically, but emotionally and soulfully, is no longer able to function. Interestingly, this line is put in parentheses. The parentheses serve to let the reader know that though this is a “Song for a Dark Girl,” the important person is the lover. The

parentheses explain how the “Girl” feels, but does not let her become the main character. The speaker doesn’t want readers to spend their entire time feeling sorry for her, but looking at the bigger picture of the injustice done to her “lover.”

The reason for this broken heart is made apparent in line three as readers see that the “lover” of the girl has been hanged. The speaker notes that it was a “black young lover.” The speaker deliberately chooses to call the “lover” “black” before she calls him “young;” conventionally, one would say young black lover. By reversing this order, the speaker makes a point that it is more important that her “lover” was “black” rather than “young.” Readers expect the “lover” to be black, since African Americans were generally the targets of lynching, although this may not be the case. “Black” also refers to an absence of light, just as “Dark” did in the title. This causes readers to question whether the “lover” was “black” in skin color, or if it was a remark on his life being impure or depressing, as black can mean both. Again, it is highly unlikely that the speaker is white; however, it is called into question as she feels the need to point out her lover’s race as being black. If she too were black, she may not feel the need to do so.

Also, calling the victim a “lover” is somewhat unexpected. Though the “lover” may be the speaker’s spouse, more appropriate word choices may have been husband or mate if that was the case. The use of “lover” implies that this relationship was one of lust, a romantic or sexual relationship that was outside of marriage, or more simply a relationship frowned upon by society. This relationship may be frowned upon for a number of reasons. For one, the speaker notes that the “lover” was “young.” If the speaker was young as well, she probably wouldn’t feel the need to express that her “lover” was young also because it would be expected. However, by explicitly saying that he is young, she makes a distinction between their ages. Though the poem doesn’t say exactly why the lover was hanged, it seems to be related to their relationship and possibly because of the age difference.

Though the “black young lover” was hanged for potentially scandalous reasons, a religious theme is brought into the poem, suggesting that the hanging serves a purpose nevertheless. In line four the speaker explains that the lover was hung “To a cross roads tree.” When one thinks of traditional hangings, trees are a common image. The reader can visualize the “lover” hanging on a tree, but to mention that it was a “cross roads tree,” brings the image of a cross to mind, as in a crucifix. It’s as if the lover is hanging for a greater purpose, just as Christians believe that Jesus was crucified for a greater purpose; the greater purpose, in the case of the “lover,” being a civil rights one.

Another image brought to mind is that the “tree” was in a place for all to see. When one imagines a cross road, the idea of a four-way road, or one with multiple roads that meet at one place, is brought to mind. In the case of the hanging, the fact that the lover was hanged “to a cross roads tree” implies that it took place in a public area. The importance of

this is that those who chose to hang the “lover” made an example of him. All in the town, or all who passed the road, were able to see the man and know why he was there.

After returning to the “Way Down South in Dixie” line in the second stanza, the speaker mentions the “lover[’s]” “(Bruised body high in air).” Again, this has a literal translation as readers picture the “lover” bruised due to the effects of the hanging, although it can also be related to a religious theme once again. As “cross” is mentioned in line four, here in line six, readers can compare the hanging body of the “lover,” with the crucifixion of Jesus as he hung on a cross. Isaiah 53 says that “[Jesus] took the punishment, and that made us whole. Through his bruises we get healed” (*The Message*, Isaiah. 53.2-6). In this comparison of the “lover” to Jesus, the outstanding theme is that their bruised bodies both stand for something greater.

The speaker notes that the “body” was “bruised.” This also fits with Jesus’ crucifixion because at the Last Supper, the night before he was crucified, Jesus broke bread and said, “this is my body, given for you,” (*The Message*, Luke. 22.19). The body of Jesus, and the “body” of the “lover” represent their living self in contrast with their soul, which may live on though their bodies were “bruised” and broken. This also relates to the “lover[’s]” body being “high in air.” “High in air” suggests that like Jesus, the “lover” was able to ascend into heaven. At first, the way the line is written in parentheses makes one feel like the speaker was trying to minimize the emotion it brings her to think of her “lover” hanging “high in air.” Instead, the parentheses may actually be used to remind her and readers that her “lover” has gone to heaven; it’s as if they have a reassuring power.

Fitting with the religious theme, in lines seven and eight, the speaker “asked the white Lord Jesus / What was the use of prayer.” As many people do in times of hardship, the speaker is questioning her faith. However, it does not seem as though she has lost all hope in her Lord. The fact that she “asked” Him anything at all shows that she still feels like it is beneficial for her to do so, whether she is waiting for a response or just talking to Him therapeutically, readers do not know. Also, by calling him “Lord” the speaker reiterates that she wants him to be in control of her life as “Lord” means to have authority or power over others.

At the point when the speaker calls “Lord Jesus” “white” readers visualize the dramatic contrast between the “Dark Girl,” “black young lover,” and “white Lord Jesus.” The stark contrast between black and white demonstrates the feeling of separation the speaker feels between her and the person she was looking for to be Lord in her life. Readers question whether calling Him “white” is to point out His purity and holiness or whether it is His race. If she is describing His purity, the impression is given that she, the “Dark Girl,” along with her “black...lover” are opposite of the “white Lord” morally. If she is making the contrast between their races, she may be feeling like Jesus is being unjust to those who are

not like Him. This is also seen by her asking “What was the use of prayer.” It’s as if she feels like Jesus is not listening. If purpose of prayer is to connect and be heard by her “Lord,” she doesn’t understand it. She wonders how such a thing could happen to her lover even though she prayed and prayed for him to be saved.

In the third stanza, the speaker repeats the first two lines of the poem: “Way Down South in Dixie / (Break the heart of me).” This repetition marks the return of the speaker to the broken feeling of despair that she began with. In her mind, the “South” now stands for the brokenness it has brought her life and her heart. She goes on to express this feeling by saying, “Love is a naked shadow.” In these lines, “Love” could mean a few things. For one, it can stand for her “lover.” Readers see her lover hanging, naked. He is nothing but a shadow now; his dark skin blends into the backdrop. However, “Love” could also be a metaphor for her faith, or more specifically Jesus. In the first stanza the speaker compared her “lover” to Jesus and could be comparing the death of her “lover” to Jesus again as they both hung naked. “Love” could also simply mean love in general. The death of the speaker’s “lover” may have made her feel as if there was no more love to be had in her life.

The “naked shadow” brings the image back to darkness, darkness of skin color and of emotion. A sort of gloom may have overcome the speaker in realizing what she used to have is nothing more than a “shadow. On the other hand, a shadow is made by an object intercepting light. In this case, the object is the hanging “lover.” The idea that the “lover” is intercepting light is an ironic idea in this situation, one that the speaker herself may fail to notice as the light religiously marks the “lover[s]” journey to heaven.

The speaker ends by explaining that “Love,” her “lover,” faith, or emotion, is “On a gnarled and naked tree.” Literally, her lover is hanging on the “tree.” Also, just as her “lover” is, Jesus was crucified on a cross, made from a tree. This can also be taken as the love the speaker used to feel is now hanging upon the “tree.” She remarks that it was a “gnarled and naked tree,” to express that it is twisted and exposed without protection, just as she feels, now that love has left her life. By providing the image of nakedness again to the readers, the speaker solidifies that she is hurting and does not know where to go in her life. She ends the poem with the word “tree.” This “tree” marks a sort of finality, not just for the poem, but possibly for the speaker’s happiness. In a way, it is this “tree” that has ruined her as it took her “lover” from her.

Though readers are left with some questions after reading “Song for a Dark Girl,” the overwhelming theme stands out nonetheless, that this is a poem, a “song” of lament, lament for an individual man and race altogether. The speaker uses historical elements, her emotions, and the hanging, with an underlying current of religious contemplation and hope, to express how the tragedy of the loss of her “lover” symbolizes the tragedy of many African

Americans at the time. The power of the poem is amplified because of its ambiguity as it can be, and is, the song of many.

Works Cited

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